

# Building an Effective and Practical National Approach to Terrorism Prevention

Terrorism prevention policy and programs aim to reduce the risk of terrorism by applying tools and approaches other than the traditional law enforcement and criminal justice tools of arrest, prosecution, and incarceration. Current federal terrorism prevention efforts subsume past activities, referred to as countering violent extremism (CVE), including such efforts as countering extremist messages online, community engagement by law enforcement and other organizations, and educating community members to recognize warning signs of radicalization to violence. Consistent with the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, current terrorism prevention efforts emphasize building effective partnerships between law enforcement, civil society, social service agencies, and communities. Such efforts broaden the options available to respond to radicalization to violence occurring in the United States. However, past U.S. CVE programs and current terrorism prevention efforts have been controversial, driven by concerns about their potential to infringe on constitutionally protected rights or to stigmatize communities. The effectiveness of past CVE efforts using these approaches, especially at the federal level, has been limited by modest resource investments and mistrust of these efforts by some communities.

In support of U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) planning and strategy development efforts, the DHS Office of Policy asked the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) to examine the current state of terrorism prevention in the United States and to develop recommendations for this area. Researchers sought to learn from past CVE efforts and to explore possible paths forward to effective, but also practical, federal and national terrorism prevention.

This research focused on policies and programs within the United States and on federal efforts in particular, although researchers also looked at available local programming, including nongovernmental organization (NGO) initiatives. Researchers also focused specifically on activities related to violence—not beliefs—since individuals' freedoms of belief, religion, and political view are protected. The research effort drew on a review of published literature and available open-source threat information; interviews with

## Key findings:

- Researchers found major gaps in national terrorism prevention efforts: Shortfalls came not only from limited programmatic focus and resource investment, but also from critics seeking to constrain or halt such efforts.
- There have been some successes, including community education efforts, formation of public-private partnerships, and development of local capacity to intervene with individuals at risk of radicalizing to violence. However, interviewees viewed those achievements as fragile because of concerns about whether the programs would be sustained.
- Researchers found that the most effective path for the federal government is to support state, local, nongovernmental, and private organizations' terrorism prevention efforts through funding and other mechanisms.
- Most interviewees also emphasized that terrorism prevention must include the threat of ideological violence from all sources, not only in words, but also in programming and investments.

terrorism prevention experts, researchers, and members of the technology industry and nonprofit organizations; field visits with state, local, and nongovernmental organizations in five U.S. cities; and case studies of seven countries' efforts.

## Major Gaps in National Terrorism Prevention Efforts

The figure shows five types of terrorism prevention activities that the federal government might engage in. These activities are organized into three phases, with the early phase focusing broadly on vulnerable populations, the middle phase focusing more narrowly on individuals at risk of radicalizing to violence, and the late phase focusing on individuals who have broken the law and are already involved in the criminal justice system.

## Types of National Terrorism Prevention Activities

<p><b>Early Phase</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Countering extremist messaging online</li> <li>✓ Community education, engagement, resilience, and risk-factor reduction</li> </ul>	<p><b>Middle Phase</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Referral promotion</li> <li>✓ Intervention</li> </ul>	<p><b>Late Phase</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Recidivism reduction</li> </ul>
<p><b>Examples</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Removal of online content advocating violence</li> <li>• Online messaging to encourage communities to identify radicalized individuals for intervention</li> <li>• Resources to assist families in helping relatives avoid radicalization to violence</li> <li>• Coordination of information-sharing and collaboration across organizations</li> <li>• Support to community youth and economic development programs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Examples</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness-building about what sorts of behaviors raise concerns</li> <li>• Community education campaigns</li> <li>• Law enforcement training</li> <li>• Risk assessment of individuals referred</li> <li>• Programs to build local intervention capability</li> <li>• Support to existing nongovernmental intervention programs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Examples</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs within federal prisons, including                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• psychological counseling</li> <li>• religious counseling</li> <li>• social support                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• family counseling</li> <li>• occupational counseling</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• Post-release programs</li> </ul>

The analysis found major gaps in national terrorism prevention efforts across all five types of activities. Shortfalls came not only from limited programmatic focus and resource investment, but also as a result of sustained opposition that tried to constrain or halt such efforts.

However, there have been some successes in community education and public-private partnerships, such as the Peer-2Peer (P2P) program, which funded university students to create media campaigns to counter extremist narratives. This program was repeatedly cited by interviewees as a success story in government cooperation with NGOs. Many interviewees viewed the recent defunding of P2P’s domestically focused component as a significant missed opportunity.

Some capacity to intervene with individuals at risk of radicalizing to violence has been built at the local level, often through existing intervention programs that address other violence and related concerns. For example, the Los Angeles Police Department recently launched the Providing Alternatives to Hinder Extremism program, which aims to respond to individuals at risk of perpetrating violence and, working with the mental evaluation unit, to intervene and provide counseling and other services. This program is nested within the broader approach taken in Los Angeles to address targeted violence. Across the nation, there are other efforts that seek to address intervention for ideologically motivated violence in the context of broader existing programs. One NGO-sponsored effort is Life After Hate, which provides crisis intervention initiatives to help people move away from racism and violent extremism.

Although federal and others’ efforts to date have built some capability, these successes are viewed as fragile because of the controversy surrounding past CVE and current terror-

ism prevention activities and the limited funding available to support programs. Both could make it impossible to sustain the modest capability built to date.

The research team also asked interviewees about major issues or problems that future terrorism prevention programs would need to address in order to be effective. The HSOAC team distilled that input into ten significant “design challenges” that must be considered in designing future terrorism prevention efforts. These design challenges are displayed in the table.

### **The Federal Government Can Best Serve as a Supporter of State, Local, NGO, and Private Efforts**

Given these challenges, researchers found that the most effective path for the federal government is to support state, local, NGO, and private organizations’ terrorism prevention efforts through funding and other mechanisms. There was strong consensus across all interviews that such efforts have to be locally designed, managed, and driven, and implemented in a way that is acceptable to the communities they are intended to protect.

At the same time, having someone aware of the federal picture who is locally based could help to build relationships, strengthen trust, and act as an on-the-ground facilitator of local terrorism prevention efforts. Interviewees reported that this could deliver immediate results and help build for the longer term. Most interviewees emphasized that terrorism prevention must include the threat of ideological violence from all sources—from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to white supremacists to environmentally inspired

## Challenges in Designing National Terrorism Prevention Efforts

Design Challenge	Description
1	Responding practically to the relatively low rate of radicalization, while also addressing the wide national dispersion of need
2	Navigating the tension between a need for efficiency, which could lead to an emphasis on specific communities, and the risk of stigmatizing communities and alienating key allies
3	Responding to variations in public trust, which can range from enthusiastic to strongly opposed
4	Managing the fact that the “damaged CVE brand” has frightened away important partners
5	Standardizing approaches in useful ways while acknowledging that terrorism prevention activities must be highly specific to local circumstances
6	Coordinating independent multidisciplinary organizations with individuals with overlapping responsibilities while avoiding conflict between operational demands and more-collaborative terrorism prevention approaches
7	Mitigating risk aversion (including fears of failure and liability), which can limit experimentation and innovation
8	Developing terrorism prevention approaches that are not dependent on specific individuals and that can be sustained through staffing changes
9	Balancing the demand for data collection and measurement in terrorism prevention with the need to avoid reinforcing community perceptions of being surveilled and stigmatized
10	Using traditional federal policy levers of funding and influence in the controversial environment that surrounds terrorism prevention efforts

violence—and must do so not only in words, but also in programming and investments.

### Effective and Practical Federal Policies and Options

The research team identified a robust menu of possible actions to support effective and practical federal policies and intervention options in the area of terrorism prevention.

**Awareness and training:** A key role for the federal government is to provide credible information, including sharing best practices and providing tools to organizations seeking to implement terrorism prevention efforts. Other types of useful central programming could include community awareness briefings and resilience exercises, which help communities identify at-risk individuals and provide referrals for intervention.

**Federal support of local initiatives:** Given the difficulties associated with direct federal action in many elements of terrorism prevention, federal government support of local initiatives via grant funding, public-private partnerships, or by working directly with communities appears to be necessary to advance efforts and build capacity. The federal government can play a useful role as a “convener,” getting people around a table to figure out what their community needs and what kind of program could meet those needs. A substantial investment in intervention capacity separate from law enforcement also would be valuable to respond to concerns in some communities and sectors regarding terrorism prevention.

**Federal program development:** Increased programmatic support would make it possible to reconstitute federal field staff focused on facilitating terrorism prevention

efforts locally and to expand their coverage nationally. Any expansion of recidivism-reduction efforts will also require federal action: The central role of the federal prison system in managing terrorism-related offenders means that it must develop capabilities at the federal level. Another issue where the federal government is best positioned to respond is the development of human capital—i.e., people who are engaged in and knowledgeable about terrorism prevention—both inside government and outside in the research and service provider sectors.

### Situational awareness and research and evaluation:

The federal government also can play a key role in data-gathering and analysis by, for example, providing situational awareness about such important topics as trends in public concern and the capacity of national intervention systems. Terrorism prevention programs would benefit from research to support better measurement and evaluation; better integration of evaluation into programs as they are implemented; the sustainability of terrorism prevention efforts; and the enduring challenge of individual risk assessment for ideologically motivated violence.

### Conclusion

The timing of this research effort, with the changeover in administrations, presents an opportunity to explore possible future paths for national terrorism prevention efforts. The goal of the approach described here is to develop effective policies and intervention options—but also practical ones—that respond appropriately to terrorism risk and do so in a way that minimizes the many costs to the individuals affected and to the society that terrorism prevention efforts aim to protect.

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This brief describes research conducted within the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) and documented in *Practical Terrorism Prevention: Reexamining U.S. National Approaches to Addressing the Threat of Ideologically Motivated Violence*, by Brian A. Jackson, Ashley L. Rhoades, Jordan R. Reimer, Natasha Lander, Katherine Costello, and Sina Marie Beaghley, RR-2647-DHS, 2019 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR2647](http://www.rand.org/t/RR2647)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB10030](http://www.rand.org/t/RB10030).

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